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Centre against Apartheid

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9 AUGUST: THE STRUGGLE OF WOMEN OF SOUTH AFRICA REMEMBERED

Statement by

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(Note: The United Nations Special Committee against Apartheid held a solemn meeting on 9 August 1990 to observe the International Day of Solidarity with the Struggle of Women of South Africa.

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The views expressed are those of the author.)

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STATEMENT BY SENATOR THE HONOURABLE DR. LUCILLE MAIR

Too often history forgets the women. We do not: and so today we remember those fearless women who on 9 August, 36 years ago, dared to defy the notorious Pass Laws of the South African Government. They have, as a result, inscribed their names forever on the country's roll of honour.

This year, as we celebrate their heroism and renew our commitment to their struggle, we are in somewhat brighter spirits than we were a year ago. For this week the world is monitoring closely the "talks about talks" taking place in Pretoria between President de Klerk and that remarkable statesman and leader of his people, Nelson Mandela, freed at last.

Those critical talks are preparatory to the long anticipated constitutional negotiations which could alter the course of history in all of southern Africa. We await their outcome with some anxiety, with understandable caution, but with great hope.

Namibia today justifies that hope. For Namibia is no longer a captive colony, illegally held by South Africa. It is now an independent sovereign State. This has come about through the determined exercise of the international will in support of those in southern Africa who are demanding equality, justice and the full enjoyment of their human rights, and who are prepared to die fighting for these rights. Namibia's eventual achievement of independence, after those many years of oppression and resistance, strengthens our faith in the power of such international solidarity mobilized through the United Nations.

The Special Committee against Apartheid, working closely with the United Nations Centre against Apartheid, has been a dynamic and effective agent of such mobilization. It has been exemplary in honouring its mandate, it has kept the issue of apartheid always high on the agenda of the United Nations; it has insistently, indeed aggressively, challenged the conscience of those who pay lip service to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

It was the Committee's concern for the vast human suffering bred by the apartheid system which led to the establishment of a support group of women - of whom I am honoured to be a member - and this was in response to the recommendation of the Seminar on the Special Needs of South African and Namibian Refugee Women and Children, organized by the Special Committee in January 1989, at Harare.

Our group has been fortunate in having the wise and sensitive leadership of Mrs. Lisbet Palme, who, like her husband the late Prime Minister Olof Palme of Sweden, has been a dedicated champion of racial equality. We had the responsibility to observe at first hand the condition of Namibian and South African women refugees in Namibia and the front-line States, all victims of South Africa's total strategy for destabilizing and dominating a whole region.

We have also the responsibility to communicate our findings to the international community, and solicit assistance for the vital needs of women refugees and returnees of southern Africa. For thousands of such women and their children, the refugee camp is the only home for - who knows how long? - and we have to help them keep hope alive.

For thousands of returnees to Namibia, and before too long, returnees to South Africa, fundamental tasks lie before them - to reunite their families; rebuild their lives and their communities; and out of the wreckage which apartheid creates to construct virtually from scratch free, productive and humane societies.

That eminent statesman of Africa, the former President of the United Republic of Tanzania, Mr. Julius Nyerere, in his recently published report of the South Commission which he chairs, has aptly described apartheid as the "antithesis of development". So it is not surprising that the grossest indices of underdevelopment are found in those countries tainted by the plague of South African apartheid.

In such situations women are doubly colonized. They suffer the disabilities of both racism and sexism, and with their children constitute the group most susceptible to exploitation and deprivation of human rights.

Our fact-finding mission found tragic evidence of this; and I quote one telling extract from our report which Mrs. Palme presented in December 1987 to the special session of the General Assembly on Apartheid and its destructive consequences in southern Africa:

"...Women and children in exile or displaced, everywhere in the region are particularly at risk. The fabric of family and society is torn. Women and children, especially girls, are abused...Not only have thousands of children died, or their development seriously impaired but also children caught in the political conflict and regional warfare have been subjected to a psychological trauma..."

UNICEF has documented in heart-breaking statistical detail the debilitating and dehumanizing consequences of apartheid on children on the front line, e.g., "twenty-five children are dying every hour from the effects of war in southern Africa..." and there is much more of these grim figures, all making the fundamental point that South Africa's strategy for destabilizing and dominating the region is directed not only at economic and military targets but also at the social fabric of nations. And this involves the destruction of health and education facilities, the dislocation of communities, the loss of food production, the constriction of development and social budgets...and so on.

Our mission to the region was all too short, but long enough to make it evident that the devastating impact of such policies on the human condition, on family and community structures cannot be easily or quickly healed. Neither the declaration of an independent Namibia nor the eventual declaration of a united, non-racial democratic South Africa can release the international community from continuing vigilance, activism and substantial support.

Such vigilance must apply at the present fragile stage of the Pretoria talks now taking place. Although they clearly indicate forward movement, and this we applaud, nevertheless we must maintain a constant alert to the very real and serious dangers which exist. The words of caution in the Declaration adopted at the special session of the General Assembly on apartheid in

December 1989 have to be our guideline: Until there is clear evidence of profound and irreversible changes, there can be no easing of international anti-apartheid measures. We have yet to see changes of this kind, and so the alert remains, sanctions remain. And we cannot stress too much that continuing international vigilance, activism and support apply as well, as absolute imperatives, to ensure not only political and constitutional transformation, but radical advancement of the human condition, without which nationhood in a new southern Africa will be meaningless.

One inspiring aspect of our group's experience was the evidence of the enormous assets which the women of the region can bring to the complex, demanding process of nation building.

To appreciate the full value of those assets, I believe that, especially on a day like this when we celebrate South Africa's heroines, we need to reflect on what it must mean to have every vital aspect of one's universe circumscribed by an arrogant ideology which cannot conceive of black being beautiful.

The world has a great deal to learn from the women who inhabit that universe, who are subjected to its daily humiliations, injustices and cruelties, and who nevertheless have persistently asserted their humanity and their womanhood. Their response to the challenges of the liberation struggles has often served to sharpen and to enhance qualities which can be invaluable national assets, as the prospects become more hopeful for countries of southern Africa to embark on more authentic courses of development.

In the area of the economy, for example, one sees the resourcefulness of women who have been key actors in the traditional economy: they have had those roles eroded by apartheid policies calculated to destroy the economic base of the black majority. As a result of massive removals, forced separation of families, and gross levels of unemployment, growing numbers of female heads of households assume full responsibilities for their families. Today the emergence of small co-operatives and self-help projects, designed to produce much needed shelter, food, child care facilities, etc., in the townships, as well as in rural communities, have great potential for meaningful assistance from international agencies. They offer opportunities of economic viability to women working together, especially if relevant training can be provided, and they are providing desperately needed human services and goods. Many of these activities have been initiated and/or supported by the women's arm of the liberation movements, for example, the Southwest African People's Organization, the African National Congress of South Africa and the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania.

In the organizations, women have acquired skills of leadership and activism with effective action, for example, the consumer resistance movement, the defiance of forced removal laws, accommodation laws, etc. In these campaigns they have demonstrated courage to an extraordinary degree, in the face of physical violence, arrest, detention and exile. The shining spirit of Winnie Mandela personifies such heroism.

If there exist residues of sexism or patriarchalism which would place

constraints on southern African women's participation in the creation of their new societies, the history of their leadership, their sacrifice, their dynamism and their incredible heroism during the past harsh decades speaks for them. And all of those talents will be needed in the daunting tasks ahead - the tasks of national reconciliation (in which they have a special healing role to play) and the task of national reconstruction.

My final words are a plea to those who would assist the women of southern Africa to listen carefully to what they themselves are saying about themselves and about their countries. I recall the strong, clear statement which Namibian women made in 1988 as they organized themselves for an ecumenical decade of activism. I quote extracts from the pledge which they made then, a pledge echoed by all women who face the criminal evil of apartheid:

"In the era of war, discrimination, racism, sexism and exploitation of women, Namibian women's voice will not keep quiet: we will address the questions affecting women and as a nation no matter how critical they may be....our work is to enable women to realize their role in the struggle for national liberation...We will not sit still. We shall support our prayer with serious action."

The international community, too, must support that prayer with serious action.
